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ABSTRACT

Fifteen boys and 15 girls were interviewed during their seventh, ninth, and twelfth years about a friendship dilemma in which the protagonist had to decide whether to keep a promise given to a friend or to accept an invitation from a third child. Interviews assessed descriptive and prescriptive aspects of the differentiation and coordination of perspectives with regard to various components of social and moral cognition. These components include thinking about: (1) action choice (or choices) and motivating reasons; (2) consequences of the violation of interpersonal-moral obligations for those concerned, including the self; (3) the regulation of such consequences; and (4) the evaluation of action-choices in terms of moral rightness. Three developmental levels of interpersonal-moral awareness were constructed on the basis of these components. Results provide evidence that children's concepts of morality are part of their understanding of actions, persons, and relationships. At the first two levels, the reasons for action and moral evaluation were clearly distinct from those derived in the context of Kohlbergian dilemmas. Marked agreement was found between Kohlberg's Stage 3 reasoning and what was characterized in this study as level 3 interpersonal-moral awareness. (RH)

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Reasoning about promise-keeping: the early development of interpersonal-moral concern

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Abstract

Piaget sees respect for moral rules as rooted in a mixture of fear and love. While the first component is evidenced in stage descriptions of moral development in the Kohlberg tradition, the second has become a favorite for alternative conceptions of morality. It is argued that the concept of justice cannot be separated from feelings and that positive concern for others play a major role in the understanding of obligations. Empirical data are presented which show that Kohlberg's description of Stage One and Stage Two of moral reasoning is too narrow to adequately represent the early development of interpersonal-moral concern.

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The problem

Cognitive-structural research on moral development in the Kohlberg tradition has been variously criticized for its emphasis on concepts of justice and fairness and, as a consequence, for its neglect of other moral concerns. Moreover, justice has been interpreted as a concept detached from feelings and affective bonding in relationships. Clearly, moral feelings and bonding play a major role in Kohlberg's conception of Stage 3 moral reasoning. It is only at this stage when the person has established a moral perspective as a member of relationships and begins to uphold moral norms for the sake of relationships. According to Kohlberg, moral rules remain somewhat external to the person at the first two stages, where development proceeds from Stage 1 rule obedience backed up by fear of punishment to a prudentially motivated model of fair exchange at the second stage. Thus it seems that there are no truly social precursors of Stage 3 conceptions of interpersonal loyalty. It is this conclusion which has aroused controversies as documented in the work

of Hoffman (1982, 1984), Gilligan (1982) and others and has even led to the somewhat questionable attempt to differentiate a morality of justice from an interpersonal morality (Haan et al., 1982).

Piaget (1932) proposed that respect for rules is grounded in a mixture of fear and affection - an idea which is in basic agreement with Freud's theory of morality. While Kohlberg's data, especially when looking at the first stage, seem to represent the authoritarian half of Piaget's heritage, we want to consider the other side of the coin.

In the present research we purport to show that development of moral reasoning is intricately connected with the development of the understanding of what it means to stand in a relation ship (Hamlyn, 1974) and that moral development reflects processes of affective bonding to (significant) others. The study uses promise-keeping as an example of a fundamental principle regulating human interaction in terms of fairness and care. Promise-keeping represents one of the moral issues assessed by Kohlberg as an important aspect of justice reasoning under the heading of "contract, trust and justice in exchange" (1976, 43). In two moral dilemma situations, the Joe and the parallel Judy dilemma, a promise has been given by parent to child, with the parent breaking the promise. While the moral conflict presented in that dilemma is a specific one, reasons for promise-keeping are explored in a general and decontextualized way. The two specific questions for which the recent manual gives stage-specific scoring examples are "Is it important to keep a promise" and "Is it important to

keep a promise to someone you don't know and probably won't see again". These questions are congruent with the aim to assess universal moral principles, but it neglects an important aspect of moral development: On the one hand, universal moral rules may be learned as particular, situation-specific rules with generalization itself a developmental achievement. Thus, analysis of the responses listed as criterion judgments in Kohlberg's scoring manual show that subjects at the lower stages tend to refer to aspects of the concrete situation, while subjects at higher stages provide more general reflections, mostly abstracting from the concrete moral dilemma experience. On the other hand the application of universal moral rules always requires situation specific considerations for their application. Even moral philosophy allows for the differentiation of obligations and responsibilities with regard to what we owe to everyone and what we owe to those with whom we stand in special relationships (see Richards, 1971; Rawls, 1971).

We hypothesize that the contextualization of moral rules in the specific conditions of a situation is an important factor in eliciting the reasons or motives for upholding it. Youniss' (1980) research, in agreement with Piaget's early work, provides clues that the power structure of relationships is a context differentiating moral development. While in authority (e.g., parent-child) relationships obedience to rules is the dominant regulating pattern, relationships of equality (e.g., peer relations) are characterized by reciprocity. Since Kohlberg's dilemmas assess promise keeping in the context of an authority

relationship, the question arises whether the types of reasons given for promise-keeping, especially at the lower stages, are influenced by the context of the situation. Given Youniss' results, the assessment of moral reasoning in a situation that is not structured in terms of power or authority is of special importance to broaden our understanding of the developmental roots of the morality of promise keeping.

Subjects and Procedure

30 children (15 boys, 15 girls) were interviewed longitudinally (ages 7, 9 and 12) about a hypothetical but experiental and affectively meaningful friendship dilemma based on Selman's friendship story. The protagonist has to decide whether to keep a promise given to the best friend or to accept an invitation from a third child who has only recently moved into the neighborhood. Various interpersonal-moral and non-moral aspects increase the complexity of the situation. The interview assesses descriptive and prescriptive aspects of the differentiation and coordination of perspectives with regard to various components of social and moral cognition. These include thinking about (1) action choice(s) and motivating reasons, (2) consequences of the violation of interpersonal-moral obligations for those concerned including the self (in terms of moral feelings), (3) the regulation of such consequences, and (4) the evaluation of action-choice(s) in terms of moral rightness. Three developmental levels of interpersonal-moral awareness are constructed on the basis of these components (Keller, 1984; Keller & Reuss, 1984). Consistent with Kohlberg's

(see Colby et al., 1979) and Selman's (1980) approach, these levels are organized in terms of the processes of perspective differentiation and coordination that constitute the cognitive structure underlying moral meaning making (see table 1). These levels represent the frame for the specific analyses in the present study.

Within each level two types of reasons are analyzed in detail: a) Reasons given for the action choice to go to the friend as promised and b) the moral evaluation of the hypothetical action choice (going to the movie or to friend). Level of interpersonal moral awareness was scored as either full stage or transitional between two stages. Interrater agreement between three raters varied between 80 % and 100 %.

Results

Table 2 shows the age-specific distribution of the levels of interpersonal moral awareness.

Analysis of longitudinal change patterns (table 3) evidence only two cases of regression while most children show age related progression. In what follows I shall present the types of reasons for action choices and moral evaluation of choices on each level: At level 0 - which in our data is only represented at the transitional level 0/1 - the only type of reason for the decision to go to the friend is hedonistic (fun to play with matchbox cars). Questions of moral evaluation of choices are not yet understood.

At level 1 and 1/2 three types of reasons are used to justify the decision: (a) the relationship (being friends and liking to

play with each other, (b) empathetic feelings resulting from the relationship (not wanting friend to be alone), (c) avoidance of negative consequences (friend wouldn't play with her any more if she didn't come). Having given a promise is hardly mentioned as reason for decision, while friend's expectations (because she's waiting) are referred to. With regard to moral evaluation going to the friend is evaluated as right decision. However, in most cases only global evaluations can be given (not nice, bad to leave someone out), whereas reasons for such evaluations cannot yet be provided. References to consequences do occur at times (friend would be angry).

At level 2 normative aspects of the situation such as "having given a promise" and "not wanting to betray" is one important type of reasons for the decision to go to the friend. As before, a second type refers to the nature of the relationship: The fact of being best friend and having been friends for a long time is a frequent reason for the decision, also offered as a second order reason for the wish to act as promised. Among the relationship-based reasons empathetic concerns (friend would feel unhappy, left out) and possible consequences of the decision for the relationship (unpleasant to break off the relationship) are frequently mentioned.

The same classes of reasons are given in the context of moral evaluation. They refer either to the obligatory nature of the promise or to the binding force of friendship. A few examples for both types follow: It is right to go to the

friend because she had said so; because she had firmly intended it and because it would be betrayal if she didn't go; because they are best friends; or old friends, it would not be right to betray or leave out an old friend.

At level 2/3 and 3 subjects spontaneously tend to take a moral perspective in the context of decision making. Thus reasons for decision include, or are based on, moral evaluations. Reasons refer to the obligatory character of promise-keeping (that one must keep promises, has to keep one's word). Again the nature of the relationship constitutes the background for the moral obligation: a promise given to a best friend generates a sense of moral necessity because it signals trust and dependability and thus does not admit exceptions. Not to hurt friend's feelings and not to destroy the harmony and intimacy of the relationship function as major action-guiding motives. Besides these rather general maxims situation-specific arguments begin to play a role: Friend's concrete feelings and needs (e.g., her jealousy of the new child and her need to talk about a problem) constitute both good and obligatory reasons for decision.

Compared to the preceding level at which only the decision to go to the friend was judged as right, subjects now frequently point out that it is not right to leave out the third child, who is new in the neighborhood and has no friends. However, considering the specific conditions of the situation, the obligation and responsibility toward the friend is given (moral) precedence over those toward the third person. Further-

more, at this level an understanding that obligations are negotiable begins to appear. However, achieving consensus with the friend about a potential change of the action plan is perceived as absolutely obligatory.

Discussion

The results of this study provides evidence that children's concepts of morality are part of their understanding of actions, persons and relations. The developing child becomes increasingly aware of the rules that govern interactions between persons. Moral rules such as promise-keeping become relevant on the basis of two sources of experience: on the one hand they are transmitted as explicit rules in socializatory interaction. On the other hand, their meaning is established in the very experience of interaction. Learning to understand obligations and responsibilities in a friendship may be a far more subtle process than learning explicit moral rules. According to our data a first step of moral development consists in the emergence of a basic awareness of concepts of rightness. They are understood as "quasi-obligations" which are based on the regularities of established action patterns (Keller & Reuss, 1984). At the second level concrete rules (such as having to keep one's promises) become significant in the context of the relationship.

At these first two levels the reasons for action and moral evaluation are clearly distinct from those derived in the context of the Kohlbergian dilemmas. Neither does fear of punishment play a predominant role at the first level nor do we find the

type of concrete reciprocity reasoning which is characteristic for Stage 2 justice reasoning. What we see is the emerging conception of a self which gradually comes to plan and evaluate actions with regard to the expectations and feelings of others with whom he or she stands in a relationship.

As to the next developmental level there is marked agreement between Kohlberg's Stage 3 reasoning and what we have characterized as level 3 interpersonal-moral awareness. At this level a generalized set of expectancies about behavior in relationships has developed which can be subsumed under the norm of reciprocity. The maintenance and respect for trust and loyalty to a friend are a predominant moral concern at this level.

Preliminary analysis of interviews with older children show that a the next level the application of a universal moral rule like promise-keeping is based on reflection of the particularities of the situation given. On the basis of general norms of interaction - how one ought to act in order to maintain a relationship - the legitimacy of interests and expectations of all persons involved, including the self, can be systematically weighed against each other with the goal to establish a rationally motivated consensus.

The conception of a moral self as part of the relationship which is characteristic of Stage 3 justice reasoning in our research thus can be shown to have precursors that are genuinely social and relationship-oriented. More than Piaget's and Kohlberg's work, our data show how the process of development represents the process of socialization into relation-

ships. Moreover, while Piaget (1932) attributes the dynamics of moral development mainly to cognitive conflict due to conflicting claims among equals in peer interactions, our subjects disclose an alternative source of the dynamic: the emerging awareness of obligations implied by the very nature of affective bonds between persons. This does not imply a gender specific morality of care and responsibility (Gilligan, 1982), nor does it imply that the nature of morality, in essence, is affective, not cognitive, as various authors have maintained, both in philosophical and psychological analyses. In short, our data suggest that an often overlooked source of morality is the person's realization of what it (morally) means to stand in a relationship; this realization is grounded in affection and involves the consciousness of the affetive bond.

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Table 1: Levels of interpersonal-moral reasoning

Level of friendship (Selman 1980)	interpretation of situation	practical judgment (reasons for decision)		consequences of violation of friendship obligation		moral discourse/ rebalancing
		consistent with friendship obligation:	inconsistent with friendship obligation (desire):	for other/relationship	for self (moral feelings)	
0						
physicalistic	self's desires	self's hedonistic desires	self's hedonistic desires	object related feelings (left out from fun)	pragmatic concerns	no understanding of justification/ compensation
1						
unilateral	self's desires/ other's desires, feelings	anticipated consequences of action for friend	desire: weighing of choices in terms of hedonism (obligation) avoidance of negative feelings	interpersonal feelings (left out from interaction) termination of interaction	empathetic concerns consequences of action for other/fear of consequences (physical action)	justification as informing about action concealment of action material compensation
2						
fair-weather cooperation	self's obligation/ other's expectation (quality of relationship)	self's obligation related to promise. friendship	desire: exceptionality of situation (good opportunity (obligation) obligation to help	violation of expectations (feeling betrayed) termination of friendship	interpersonal/ normative concerns (guilt over betraying reciprocity/ veridicality fear over termination of friendship	perceived necessity of information concealment of action (explicit lying) (asking permission, asking forgiveness)
3						
intimate friendship	self/other relationship of mutual concern over time, trust, interpersonal trust, loyalty (psychological particularities of situation)	self's obligation related to moral self and ideal of friendship (being a trustworthy person/ friend)	exceptionality in context of relationship (hypothetical role-switch) desire: opportunity (obligation) to integrate into friendship	betraying as violation of friendship loyalty/ moral evaluation of actor's personality diminution of friendship	guilt over breach of trust in relationship conscience shame over moral inadequacy of action	perceived necessity of negotiating decision/ justifying decision through reasons/ reassurance of solidarity in communication

From: Keller, M. (1984). Resolving conflicts in friendship: the development of moral understanding in everyday life. In W. Kurtines, & J. Gewirtz (eds.), Morality, moral behavior, and moral development. New York: Wiley, 140-158

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Table 2

Age distribution of levels of interpersonal-moral awareness at three successive measurement points

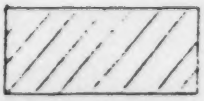
levels of moral awareness	Measurement points			
	7 year olds	9 year olds	12 year olds	N
0				
0/1	4			4
1	12			12
1/2	5	7		12
2	9	19	12	40
2/3		4	13	17
3			5	5
N	30	30	30	

Table 3

Levels of interpersonal-moral awareness: developmental progression, stability and regression at three measurement points

Levels 7 year olds	Levels 9 year olds 1/2	2	2/3	N
0/1	3	1	0	4
1	2	8	2	12
1/2	0	5	0	5
2	2	5	2	9
N	7	19	4	30

Levels 9 year olds	Levels 12 year olds 2	2/3	3	N
1/2	5	1	1	7
2	7	8	4	19
2/3	0	4	0	4
N	12	13	5	30



regression cells